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ABSTRACT

A survey assessed the current status of the business and professional communication course. A questionnaire was completed by faculty members at 39 Texas colleges and universities. Results indicated that 66% of the institutions surveyed offer a course in business and professional communication (with titles such as Business Speech, Oral Communication, and Business and Professional Communication), and with different approaches used, such as a combination course or a public speaking course. Results also ranked specific communication skills included in such courses according to their importance (including organization of ideas, self confidence, and eye contact), and indicated the class time devoted to the various skills. (Three tables of data are included; 22 references are attached.) (SR)

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The Status of the Business and Professional Communication Course

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Abstract

Communication skills are considered essential for the successful operation of today's corporations. As educators, we must ask ourselves if we are teaching what business and industry needs? Are we including the specific communication skills which will enable our students to be successful in their careers? To assess the relevancy of the business and professional communication course, a survey of Texas colleges and universities was conducted.

Business and industry executives consider communication skills essential to the success of their corporations. Employees are hired because of technical expertise, academic credentials and communication skills (Posner 1981). However, employers continue to voice a common criticism that engineers and scientists do not know how to communicate. Wismer (1989) describes this as a damaging perception of professionals who must work with others to achieve their goals. Communication--"the ability to explain yourself"-- is vital to success.

Emphasizing the need for better communication, Holm (1967) explains that society requires knowledge, specialization, and the ability to adapt to the rapid growth of industry. Projects investigating business and professional communication continue to offer research opportunities (Swensen, 1980; Hanna, 1978; Sorenson, & Pearson, 1981). Clark's investigation (1968) of business communication found that the ability to communicate was a major consideration in executive selection and advancement and that business graduates typically lack sufficient preparation in oral competency. McAdams (1980) expressed a similar concern and LeNoir (1975) also determined that more colleges in 1974 offered or required business communication courses than in 1960 and that they anticipated offering additional courses in the future.

The relevancy of the curriculum of communication departments should enhance the employment opportunities of students. Career education is important (Goyer & Eadie, 1975; Bisconti & Solomon, (1976) and students can obtain management positions with a background in organizational communication. Communication departments which train students in the necessary skills for positions in business provide that necessary edge in competing for career advancement (Tubbs, 1975; Golen, 1981; Rochester & DiGaetani, 1981). Business and industry should perceive these departments as sources of qualified job applicants. Respondents to a questionnaire in 1960 indicated that of the top six courses most frequently used, four were communication-related (Simonds 1960). Preparing graduates for a career in business provides the impetus for this study which investigated the current status of business and professional communication courses offered in Texas colleges and universities.

Method

This study surveyed faculty members of communication departments in Texas colleges and universities. The colleges and universities contacted were selected from The College Blue Book. Eighty faculty members were sent a questionnaire with a cover letter explaining the study. A pilot study established the validity of the questionnaire.

Results

Forty-nine percent of the questionnaires were returned. Sixty-six percent of those institutions surveyed (39) offer a course in business and professional communication. Titles of the course include Business Speech, Oral Communication, and Business and Professional Communication.

The different approaches used in the course is represented in Table I. In the "Other" category, a combination course was most frequently mentioned.

Insert Table I here

Research studies indicate that the skills most frequently used by both financial and personnel employees were listening, advising, and routine information exchange. Graduates ranked public speaking as the skill most infrequently used, but most helpful in their careers. Graduates also wished that they had received instruction in public speaking and communication while in college (DiSalvo, Larsen, & Seiler, (1976); Lahiff & Hatfield, 1978; Walde, 1973).

Table 2 indicates the specific communication skills included in a business and professional communication course and how important these skills were to universities and businesses.

Insert Table 3 here

Table 3 indicates the class time devoted to the various communication skills. The American Business Association reported in 1976 on a follow-up survey concerning the basic business communication courses which strengthened their research about content and classroom procedures. They stated the proportions of time spent in public speaking, interpersonal or small group communication, interviewing, listening, and the psychology of communication should be increased. In classroom procedures, time spent in lectures should be reduced and time devoted to small group discussions and student presentations should be increased (ABCA Bulletin 1976).

Discussion

In reviewing the literature, it became apparent that business and industry placed great emphasis on oral communication skills. Fifty-one presidents of the largest corporations in the United States have expressed their belief that a relationship between communication and employee productivity exists (Lull 1955). Communication continues to play a vital role whether the corporation has instituted team work/quality circles (Alie, 1986; Scicutella, 1988) or a new approach to the style of managers (Phillips, 1988; Gilberg, 1988; Bradley & Hill 1987). Even some medical school programs are including small group problem solving sessions that bring the students in contact with real and hypothetical patients which involves communication (Dodge, 1990).

A study of managers reported that courses needed were those in communication techniques, financial management, and fundamentals of supervision. It recommended that universities offer courses in human relations, communications, and management development (Dubin 1967). Engineers are now encouraged to learn management techniques and communication skills in order to compete (Aikens, 1991; Mulgrew, 1991).

A survey conducted by Bennett (1971) stressed that a formal course in business communication was needed for adequate preparation for management positions. One person interviewed said, "We think that it is highly desirable that a course in business communications be in all business curricula. One of the greatest weaknesses we see in the college graduates that come to us is the limitation in their ability to communicate both orally and in writing." (Bennett 1971).

This study indicated that many Texas colleges and universities are offering a communication course which could help their graduates achieve career goals. But, if a course is not offered, one should be developed. Faculty members should also maintain contact with business and industry to revise curriculum when needed.

Ongoing research is needed to update the status of the business and professional communication courses offered in colleges and universities.

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TABLE I

BASIC APPROACH TO BUSINESS

COMMUNICATION COURSE

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Public speaking	10	38.462
Group discussion	1	3.846
Interpersonal	4	15.385
Communication theory	0	0.000
Other (please specify	11	42.308

TABLE 2

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN A BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

Communication Skills	Frequency and Percentage	Very Important	Some Importance	Not Important
1. Organization of ideas:	f	21	5	0
	%	80.76	19.23	0.00
2. Supporting materials:	f	20	5	1
	%	75.92	19.23	3.84
3. Public speaking	f	18	8	0
	%	69.23	30.76	0.00
4. Coping with defensiveness:	f	6	16	4
	%	23.07	61.53	15.38
5. Interviewing:	f	9	14	3
	%	34.61	53.84	11.53
6. Recognizing communication barriers:	f	16	9	1
	%	61.53	34.61	3.84
7. Eye contact:	f	20	5	0
	%	76.92	19.23	3.84
8. Self-Confidence:	f	21	5	0
	%	80.92	19.23	3.84
9. Listening:	f	15	8	3
	%	57.69	30.76	11.53

TABLE 3

CLASS TIME

Communication Skills	Freg. and Pct.	50% or more	30% - 50%	10% - 30%	Less than 10%	None
1. Public speaking	f	10	7	6	3	0
	%	38.46	26.92	11.53	11.53	0.00
2. Interpersonal	f	2	5	11	6	2
	%	7.69	19.23	42.30	23.07	7.69
3. Group discussion:	f	0	2	16	4	4
	%	0.00	7.69	61.53	15.38	15.38
4. Leadership:	f	0	2	8	8	8
	%	0.00	7.69	30.76	30.76	30.76
5. Interviewing:	f	0	1	11	8	6
	%	0.00	3.84	42.30	30.76	23.07
6. Listening:	f	0	2	9	10	5
	%	0.00	7.69	34.61	25.00	19.23
7. Communication theory:	f	1	3	8	10	4
	%	3.84	11.53	30.76	38.46	15.38